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No Salvation *without* the Church: Interfaith Praxes in the Company of Pope Francis

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Extra ecclesiam nulla salus has been central to Catholic understandings of salvation for centuries, but precisely what that means with regard to people of other Christian denominations, other faiths, and people of no faith, has been subject to re-interpretation. This paper argues that in the words and deeds of Pope Francis, he has suggested that people of any faith and none can and should be viewed as 'valued allies' to the Catholic Church, especially where anyone is willing to work cooperatively for the common good of all. I propose that this way of thinking about people outside of the Catholic Church constitutes a rethinking of the ancient mantra that recognizes the necessity of churches, people of other faiths and no faith, being willing to work together to realize the common goals of equality, peace and justice.

KEYWORDS: Salvation, Pope Francis, Praxis, Church, Inter-Faith Relationships

Introduction

Mainstream Catholic teaching on salvation regarding people of other faiths has historically been encapsulated in the notion of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (no salvation outside the Church). Precisely what this means in practice has necessitated a process of reinterpretation across the centuries as the Church has sought to address itself to new contexts and questions in ecumenical and inter-faith relationships. There is widespread agreement that in the twentieth century, the most significant development in Catholic approaches to other Christian traditions and faith perspectives was the Second Vatican Council, though publications from Vatican departments alongside teaching from subsequent popes have both suggested that the meaning of the Conciliar teachings are continuing to evolve. This ongoing development can be seen once again in the actions, words and formal teaching of Pope Francis. In this paper, I argue that the emphasis of Francis' approach to ecumenism and relationships with people of other faiths, in light of Vatican II, emphasises the centrality of co-operative action between and among people from many churches and faith traditions - and none - with a view to working towards a more just and peaceful world. This represents a significant departure in certain respects from the emphases of his predecessor, Benedict XVI. Though Pope Francis does not say this directly, instead of no salvation outside of the church, I would like to propose that his approach to soteriology at the point of ecumenism and inter-faith relationships is one that could be characterised as 'no salvation without the church' or

perhaps even more radically 'no salvation without the cooperation of people of all faiths and none'.

Salvation in Historical Catholic Teaching

I have proposed above that the notion of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* has been the subject of reinterpretation across the centuries as the Catholic Church has needed to respond to new situations that confronted it. Thus it is necessary to begin by defending that proposal. According to Sullivan (1996), Catholic approaches to people of other faiths have been constantly rearticulated as the result of the Church seeking to be faithful to its traditions while responding to circumstances in which it found itself. For example, he traces the notion of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* throughout Catholic history noting how in the thirteenth century Pope Boniface VIII interpreted this to mean that, 'it is a matter of necessity for salvation to be subject to the Roman Pontiff' (Sullivan, 1996: 64-5). However, Sullivan argues that, on the discovery of the Americas in the fifteenth century, while the tradition of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* was maintained, this notion began to be reinterpreted in light of discovering lands in which people existed who had never heard - and never could have heard - about Jesus Christ (Sullivan, 1996: 63-82). Would they be condemned to perpetual suffering and damnation through no fault of their own? The response was 'no', Sullivan argues, but rather, by drawing on Aquinas' notion of baptism *in voto* (by desire), it was possible to desire to belong to the Church, without actually being subject to the Pontiff through baptism (Sullivan, 1996: 63-82)¹. A new context demanded a new way of speaking soteriologically and the Church subsequently responded.

The Second Vatican Council was a landmark event, for many aspects of the life of the Catholic Church as a whole. The Council sought to address itself to a number of major questions confronting the Church and it did so with regard to the Church's relationships to other churches and faiths. In an increasingly changing and globalizing world that was post-World War Two, post-Holocaust and in the midst of the Cold War, Catholic theologians were asking significant questions about historic attitudes towards people of other faiths. Karl Rahner argued that 'The Christian is convinced that in order to achieve salvation man [*sic.*] must believe in God, and not merely in God but in Christ' (Rahner, 1969: 390). However, he could not reconcile the notion of a God of love to historic attitudes towards people of other faiths arguing that we 'must reject' any notion that the 'overwhelming mass' of people in the world should be condemned 'to eternal meaninglessness'. (Rahner, 1969: 391)

¹ Another discussion of how approaches to salvation have developed in the Western tradition to address contextual changes can be found in Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker's significant text, *Saving Paradise* (2008). I also offer some discussion of how soteriologies responded to and emerged out of ecclesial praxes in *Salvation as Praxis* (2014) pp.36-82

Thus, the Council sought to respond to the contexts and questions that confronted it and, in so doing, developed further its understanding of *nulla salus extra ecclesiam*.

Conciliar documents such as *Lumen Gentium* proposed that 'truth' and 'sanctification' could be found outside of the 'visible Church' and that 'those who have not yet received the Gospel are related in various ways to the people of God' (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964). This builds on the notion of baptism and membership of the church *in voto* described above, but made explicit an understanding of the value of other faith traditions for truth and sanctification. Similarly, *Nostra Aetate* explained that the Catholic Church regarded with 'reverence' the teachings and ways of life of other faith traditions that often 'reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men [*sic.*]' (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965). This document also called for Christians and Muslims to work towards 'social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom' and anticipates a day when 'all peoples will address the Lord in a single voice and "serve him [*sic.*] shoulder to shoulder" (Soph. 3:9)' (*Nostra Aetate*, 1965). Given the history of the Church's relations with people of other faiths, and notwithstanding that the Church maintained that in it alone could truth and sanctification fully be found, this initiated a new way of perceiving and engaging with people of other faiths whose traditions could be said to have merit, and that traditions outside of the Church could reveal something of 'truth'.

On ecumenical matters, the key text of the Second Vatican Council was *Unitatis Redintegratio*. While explaining that 'unity subsists in the Catholic Church' (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964) nevertheless the value of other Christian denominations was affirmed. It was acknowledged that the Catholic Church drew on Eastern traditions in its theology and in the development of Western monasticism, for example. It affirms that 'only through Christ's Catholic Church, which is "the all-embracing means of salvation," that they can benefit fully from the means of salvation' (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964). Nevertheless, this Conciliar document acknowledges that other denominations 'can truly engender a life of grace' and that their 'liturgical actions must be regarded as capable of giving access to the community of salvation' (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 1964). What is evident in this document is that there is a greater openness to the possibility of salvation realised in other Christian denominations; that their baptism may well be considered authentic; and that the Catholic Church has a debt of gratitude to denominations from which it is divided. Nevertheless, the chief agenda of the document is to encourage Catholics, in theology and in practice, to work towards the unity of the Church under the headship of Peter and his successor, an institution believed to be willed by Christ. The focus therefore, of the Conciliar statement is of a commitment to ecumenism and dialogue, but with the goal of unity of all

denominations with a recognition of the Pope as the head of that Church.

While the Second Vatican Council never fully adopted Karl Rahner's notion of the 'anonymous Christian' as a part of their thinking about people of other faiths, his thinking was hugely influential on the Council itself and, more broadly, in Catholic thinking about people of other faiths. Other key Catholic voices have included Rosemary Radford Ruether's work on Anti-Semitism first published in the 1973 and her subsequent work on Palestine and her conversations with Rita M. Gross on Buddhism and Christianity (2001). Working in a British context, Gerald O'Collins (2008) and Gavin D'Costa (2009) have both explored questions of salvation with regard to people of other faiths with O'Collins arguing for a form of soteriological universalism and D'Costa arguing that his own position, and that of the Catholic Church, is one of universal-access exclusivism (D'Costa, 2009: 25); that is, salvation is available to everyone, but only realized by those hear the Gospel and accept it, either in this life or in purgatory/limbo. It is also important to note Paul Knitter's notion of pluralism informed by liberation theologies here too (see Knitter, 1995). Whatever the current position on the possibility of truth and sanctification in other faiths, or whether people of other faiths might experience salvation, the recent discourses of Pope Francis have developed the Conciliar teachings in new ways once again, and it is these developments that I would like to explore next.

Pope Francis' Trip to the Middle East in June 2014

During Pope Francis' visit to the Middle East - in particular, Jordan, Israel and Palestine - in June 2014, many of the news reports were almost all devoted to his actions, with much less media attention given to what he had to say. These included his time spent with the journalists on the aeroplane, gestures where he touched and prayed at the concrete wall dividing Israel and Palestine in the same fashion in which he prayed at the Western Wall in Jerusalem and the memorial commemorating victims of 'terrorism'. He prayed with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople who went to meet him in Jerusalem, while also praying at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial. He visited the Dome of the Rock, took off his shoes, and described Muslims as his 'brothers and sisters' (Francis, 2014) and prayed that all may learn to 'respect and love one another' (Francis, 2014). The coverage of the trip by journalists was suggested to express something of the distinctive nature of the pontificate of Francis and one that departed in particular from the approach of his predecessor. Such distinctives of Francis' pontificate expressed through deeds have further included his refusal to occupy the papal apartments, to use expensive cars, to engage with people behind bullet-proof glass, and his embrace of a much simpler lifestyle.

If one of the concerns of practical theology is that it studies the 'purposeful' activities of individuals and communities of faith that themselves reveal 'living principles' (Graham, 2002: 110), then what do these intended and arguably incredibly deliberate symbolic actions and words in the Middle East in June 2014 indicate about how Catholic approaches to ecumenical and inter-faith relationships might be developing under the leadership of Pope Francis and do they have soteriological significance? These acts themselves, read in light of much of what Francis has said and done in the first year of his pontificate, represent a wider shift in emphasis in the ways that the Catholic Church is beginning to approach ecumenical and inter-faith relations that develop Vatican II and depart from some of the emphases of Pope Benedict XVI in these areas. In the remainder of this paper I would like to reflect further on what Francis' actions and words suggest about this shift and to consider his approach in particular as a development and reinterpretation of the notion of *nulla salus extra ecclesiam*.

Pope Francis and Ecumenism

Pope Francis' first sentiments on ecumenism were expressed on the day after his inauguration when he met with representatives of various Christian traditions and other faith communities. At this event, he explained that it was his 'firm intention to pursue the path of ecumenical dialogue' (Francis, 2013a). He does not, however, speak of unity as something expressed in a single Church denomination under the headship of Peter's successor, but instead, he suggests that Christian persons should seek to

live fully the faith graciously bestowed upon us at our Baptism and to bear witness to it freely, joyfully and courageously. This will be the best service we can offer to the cause of Christian unity, a service of hope for a world torn by divisions, conflicts and rivalries (Francis, 2013a).

As Christian persons and communities engage in this kind of activity, he argues, 'the more we will progress, really and substantially, towards unity' (Francis, 2013a). What we note here is not a reassertion of the desire for unity under the headship of the successor of Peter articulated at Vatican II, but rather that unity is served through a Christian collaborative response to faith through praxis.

In two further meetings with representatives of other Christian denominations, including the Archbishop of Canterbury (Francis, 2013b) and a delegation from the Patriarch of Constantinople (Francis, 2013c), Pope Francis echoed similar sentiments. He explains that the search for unity is neither a 'mere theoretical exercise' nor is it motivated 'by practical considerations' (Francis, 2013c). Instead, the unity of the churches is sought because it is

‘the will of the Lord Jesus Christ himself’ (Francis, 2013b). But again, this unity is characterised by and expressed through actions. First, it ‘demands in-depth knowledge of one another’s traditions in order to understand them and sometimes also to learn from them’ but this ‘notion of dialogue... is not about seeking a theological lowest common denominator on which to reach a compromise, but is rather about deepening our grasp of the sole truth that Christ has given to his Church’ (Francis, 2013c). However, this quest for unity is not simply an inter-church conversation in pursuit of truth, but a common task of praxis whereby ‘our daily efforts to grow towards unity... are concretely expressed in our cooperation in various areas of daily life’ (Francis, 2013b). This includes promoting, ‘the sacredness of human life and the institution of the family built on marriage’ and ‘the effort to achieve greater social justice, to build an economic system that is at the service of man [*sic.*] and promotes the common good’ (Francis, 2013b). In particular, this involves, ‘giving a voice to the cry of the poor, so that they are not abandoned to the laws of an economy that seems at times to treat people as mere consumers’ (Francis, 2013b). Ecumenism is not understood as something expressed in unity of hierarchy, structure and institution but rather in terms of the common and corporate pursuits of truth and justice, albeit defined and determined by Catholic tradition and theology.

Pope Francis and Inter-Faith Relationships

Pope Francis’ approach to engagement with people of other faiths has taken a similar tone to his discourses on ecumenism, particularly with regard to the pursuit of justice, peace and the common good. Unlike Paul Knitter, there has been no intimation that the legitimacy or value of a faith tradition can be measured by the extent to which it subscribes to the way people of different religious traditions might collaborate on issues of justice (Knitter, 2005, 28-42). In the same speech that Francis made following his inauguration to ecclesial communities, he also addressed representatives of other faith communities. To representatives of Muslim communities who were there, he explained that he saw their presence as ‘a tangible sign of a will to grow in mutual esteem and in cooperation for the common good of humanity’ (Francis, 2013a). He spoke also of the Church having a role in ‘promoting friendship and respect between men and women of different religious traditions’ (Francis, 2013a). Together, people of faith can subsequently do a good deal to ‘benefit the poor, the needy and those who suffer and to favour justice, promote reconciliation and to build peace’ (Francis, 2013a). Again, he spoke of the significant role religious communities can have in resisting the reduction of the value of human persons to their capacity to consume.

Perhaps most radically of all, however, and in departure from the sentiments of Benedict XVI, Francis further suggested that those

who do not identify with 'any religious tradition' can be understood as 'valued allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building a peaceful coexistence between peoples and in safeguarding and caring for creation' (Francis, 2013a). Unlike Benedict's condemnation of secularization, Francis suggests working with people who identify as secular who share the same goals for humanity and the world as people of faith. Seeking to make people of different faith traditions - and none - conform to a particular understanding of God were not part of the discourse at all, but rather he suggests that the Church wishes to, and has a responsibility to join with other people of other faiths and none to promote peace and justice in the world and to defend the dignity of every human person, especially the poor, as well as the rest creation. While these may not be values that all people of all faith traditions would wish to subscribe - and herein lies the limitation of Francis' approach - the shift in emphasis on interfaith relations is one of friendship - expressed in praxis - leading towards a greater good for humanity.

As with the Pope's discourses on ecumenism, in a speech to members of the International Jewish Committee on Interreligious Consultations, Francis spoke about his own experience of working alongside members of the Jewish community in Argentina and that 'as friends, we enjoyed each other's company, we were all enriched through encounter and dialogue, and we welcomed each other, and this helped all of us to grow as people and as believers' (Francis, 2013d).² Notably, the Pope has spoken of how his faith can be deepened not only through dialogue with Christians of other traditions, but through encounter with people of other faiths too. He also notes in this speech that 'Humanity needs our joint witness in favour of respect for the dignity of man and woman created in the image and likeness of God, in favour of peace which is above all God's gift' (Francis, 2013d).

Similarly, in a message to Buddhists on the Feast of Vesakh/Hanamatsuri in May 2013, the President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, Cardinal Tauran, spoke of the urgency of Buddhists and Christians seeking to 'create a climate of peace to love, defend and promote human life' (Tauran, 2013). He goes on to call on Buddhists and Christians,

to join hands to unmask the threats to human life and to awaken the ethical consciousness of our respective followers to generate a spiritual and moral rebirth of individuals and societies in order to be true peacemakers who love, defend and promote human life in all its dimensions (Tauran, 2013).

² An account of the conversations between the Pope and a Rabbi in Argentina are recorded in Bergoglio and Skorka (2013), *On Heaven and Earth*.

Engagement with people of other faiths is characterised by encounter with others, conscious that through encounter both may be changed. But notably, interfaith engagement is characterised by seeking to address questions of justice and dehumanization of people across the world and that religious communities have a role in seeking to protect and defend human dignity and promote a more humane life for all people. Just as unity between Christians is best expressed in concrete acts that lead to justice, so Christians have a role alongside people of other faiths and none, perceived not as enemies but as friends, to work towards the common good.

Contrasting Francis with Benedict XVI

Under the Pontificate of Benedict XVI, Cardinal Tauran explained, in a message to mark the end of Ramadan in 2012, that the 'great challenges of today' include, 'Harmonious growth, integral development and resolution of conflicts' while the message emphasised also the importance of education of 'Christians and Muslims for justice and peace' (Tauran, 2012a). The same cardinal, in another message in 2012, spoke of the importance of human rights, 'in particular religious rights' and that 'believers have to work for and to support all that favours the human person in his *[sic.]* material, moral and religious aspirations' (Tauran, 2012b). In the previous Pope's message to the newly elected Archbishop of Canterbury in early 2013, he said: 'You take up your office at a time when the Christian faith is being called into question in many parts of the Western world by those who claim that religion is a private matter, with no contribution to offer to public debate' (Benedict XVI, 2013). Unity is understood in this message to refer to full communion between the two Churches that 'will arise only as a gift from the Lord' (Benedict XVI, 2013). Similarly in a message to the Patriarch of Constantinople, Benedict XVI explained

We have long been in full agreement with Your Holiness on the most urgent challenge today: how to bring the proclamation of God's merciful love to the people of our time, so often distracted and more or less incapable of profound reflection on the actual meaning of their existence, seen in the light of projects and utopias that cannot but leave them disappointed (Benedict XVI, 2012).

There are notable similarities between some of the sentiments expressed under Benedict XVI and those of Francis. Both suggest that religions have a role to play in the world to help to make the world better and that people of faith ought to collaborate to that end. It may be argued, nevertheless, that Francis' concerns about justice, dignity, a humane life for all, the achievement of peace, the tackling of poverty and care for the poor, and being responsible for creation are more noticeably concrete in what he has said. Francis

also gives more specific examples of the ways that people of faiths can work together towards a greater common good for the world. That is, there is less emphasis on the *idea* that people of faith might collaborate with one another, and more emphasis on the encouraging people to engage in the *praxis* of collaboration. The most significant difference between Francis and Benedict XVI, however, is represented in the former Pope's pre-occupation and concern with the advancement of secularism. For Benedict, secularism was one of his main concerns and he argued that religions and churches have a responsibility to address the influence of secular thought and values in the contemporary world (Benedict XVI, 2012). While this may be a concern for Francis too, his emphasis seems to be much more focussed not on combating secularism, but on addressing questions of justice and peace. As has been already indicated, the suggestion that people of no faith who share similar concerns as people of faith should not be regarded as a threat to the Church but as allies in the pursuit of the common good.

No Salvation Without the Church.. ((..es) and People of Other Faiths and No Faith)?

There are many different ways in which salvation has been understood in the Christian tradition. Predominantly, however, and especially in Western traditions, salvation has been understood to be principally concerned with the possibility of a future eschatological existence. That existence is one of detachment from earthly life, the escape of the soul from the prison of the body, and participation in a heavenly life in communion with God and the saints (Morris, 2014: 39-44). To speak of no salvation outside of the Church was once to speak of no participation in a future heavenly existence without being baptised into the Catholic Church. However, as we have already noted, this understanding of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* has developed over the centuries as the Church has sought to be faithful to tradition, while being relevant to each new context in which it was located. However, perhaps the understanding of salvation itself and what it means is now also being redefined for the twenty-first century too.

Redefining Catholic theologies of salvation has already been extensively addressed by, among many others, the liberation theologians of South America who have no doubt had influence on Pope Francis' thought. Salvation, it has been argued, should be redefined not as participation in a future hoped for utopia in a world beyond planet earth. Rather, in light of the Exodus narrative, salvation can be understood as liberation from the bonds of slavery, economic deprivation and political repression, into a new and better possibility that can be realised and established in this world: the kingdom of God on earth (e.g. Gutierrez, 1988 and Sobrino, 2008). It is worth considering the significance of such a way of speaking

about salvation in interfaith and ecumenical contexts. In the company of Pope Francis, if different Christian denominations and people of many different faiths and none can work together to address questions of poverty, injustice, oppression, the abuse of creation and so forth, then what is being spoken about is, I argue, soteriological. This is soteriological in that it is referring to the transformation of one reality into a new and better reality, from poverty to equality, from injustice to justice, from oppression to liberation and so forth. This is a soteriological possibility that can be realised in the present, and can transform the present for the better. But perhaps even more significantly, the very theology of the Church that has often been at the heart of discourses that have perceived people of other faiths and none as the enemy, become, in the words of Pope Francis, 'valued allies' in realising this soteriological task.

In turn, this has the potential to develop further once again the meaning of *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. No salvation without the Church means no realisation of a better earthly existence without the Church participating in the task of making it so. The Church has a key and central role in facilitating dialogue that can lead to such transformative acts with its' secular, multifaith and interdenominational allies in the cause for justice. Members of the Church, together with people of all faiths and none are necessary to bring about the realization of a more just and peaceful world where every human life is valued. I noted above, however, a potential weakness with this approach, and that is the way the vision of a new and better earthly reality is articulated. Christian denominations, people of other faiths and spiritual pathways, and people who identify as secular do not and never will all share a single vision of what a just and fairer world will look like. Francis' vision of this world is one informed by his own perspective located within Catholic tradition and he can do no other than speak from that location. But it will be necessary for others to articulate their visions too which may at times involve difference of opinion with one another so that, earthly salvation, realized through praxis, involves a constant process of speaking, listening and negotiation. But the churches and other faith traditions have a role to play in this, and that is the point that I wish to make in light of the words and deeds of Pope Francis – they have a part to play in making this world better, whatever that might look like in reality.

Conclusion

As new contexts cause the churches to rethink and reinterpret what has become established belief, and as new alternative theologies emerge, they have the possibility of shaping new praxes too. Much theological discourse regarding ecumenism and people of other faiths has historically focussed the gaze of Christians on other-worldly possibilities, participation in which has necessitated

conformation to Christian norms. Subsequently, the history of Christian relations with people of other faiths, informed by soteriological discourse, has often been worked out in bloodshed, conquest and mistrust of the 'other'. Francis words, and perhaps more so, his actions, draws that gaze back down to this world, encouraging the Catholic faithful to perceive people of other faiths and none as allies in a soteriological task: the transformation of humanity and the whole of creation into a new and better possibility. The Church is still necessary for salvation as this alternative reality cannot be realised without it. However, rather than claiming that the Church has all of the answers, Francis suggests that this alternative reality is dependent on people of all faiths and none, all people of good will, committed to the common good: no salvation with the church, people of all faiths, and none! In a world where mistrust of the other and suspicion of people of other faiths continues to be a part of human life as well as religious discourses, such alternative ways of understanding one another and collaborating together, will surely become ever increasingly important as means of providing more peaceful frameworks for living together.

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